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Where the ‘Buffalo’ roam ... 5th Eng. Bn. Soldiers clear roads of IEDs

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BAGHDAD – Riding in the massive beast-of-a-vehicle, the Buffalo crew uses the benefit of its higher vantage and scans the roads and surrounding areas. Each crew member is responsible for his own sector, each contributing to the safety and well-being of their fellows. Brotherly chatter flies through the headsets – deep and personal conversation peppered with cheap shots and banter – as they incessantly watch for threats.

These Soldiers share a warm sense of camaraderie, which Spc. Patrick Cerceau, Buffalo driver from 2nd Platoon, Company B, 5th Engineer Battalion, and native of Lake Tahoe, Calif., describes as developing from shared experiences “of getting blown up together as many times as we have.”

Attacks with improvised-explosive devices are perhaps the greatest risk for any Soldier traveling by convoy in Iraq. For these guys, the threat is magnified.

The Buffalo crews' job is to hunt IEDs – to actively seek out and eliminate the threats so both Coalition Forces and the citizens of Iraq can be assured safe movement around the country – and as the record shows, they are extremely proficient at what they do.

At the tail end of their yearlong deployment, the Soldiers of 5th Eng. Bn., based out of Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and assigned to Multi-National Division – Baghdad's 16th Engineer Brigade, have found 310 IEDs while patrolling the streets of Baghdad.

On Wednesday, the teams thwarted a complex attack effort by terrorists when they discovered three IEDs and an unexploded ordnance along a single street in western Baghdad.

The three IEDs were found by the Soldiers from 2nd Plt., Co. B, who were attacked by terrorists using small-arms fire after the Soldiers discovered the second roadside bomb.

"We go out every day looking for bombs," said Staff Sgt. Ramon Martinez, squad leader, 2nd Plt., Co. B. The battalion is only one of the units that provide daily route clearance within Multi-National Division – Baghdad's area of operations, he added.

Route clearance is undeniably one of the most dangerous jobs in Iraq. The Soldiers perform their missions every day, day in and day out. Some days they locate IEDs, but some are just a long, hot ride around the streets of Baghdad, though their very presence acts as a deterrent to terrorist emplacement of IEDs. For those "easy" days, the crews say they are just thankful everyone came home in one piece.

The Soldiers of 2nd Plt., Co. B have found 40 IEDs during their deployment, which adds to their company's total of 118 finds – the highest in 5th Eng. Bn.

“I’ve been through 18 blasts myself,” he said proudly, not long before another blast rocked the Buffalo and the Soldiers felt the concussion “like a thud in your chest.” That brought his tally up to 19 blasts.

The blast came from one of the IEDs after it was discovered and unearthed. The platoon immediately began clearing the market street of civilians and set out to prevent traffic from coming close to the area. The Buffalo crew was attacked by small arms-fire moments before the blast, but due to their professionalism and safety procedures, no one was hurt and the damage was contained.

The remaining two IEDs were also cordoned off and an MND-B Explosive Ordnance Disposal team was dispatched.

The bombs could have done serious damage along the crowded market street of shops, schools and homes, said Martinez soberly, as he looked out the window at a group of school kids watching from a distance and shook his head.

“But thankfully, we found them,” he said.

The crew members have seen the effects and devastation IED attacks can inflict, which is why they are so committed to minimizing their threat.

“I want to go out there and find bombs,” said Martinez, a native of Yuma, Ariz. “It’s our job to look for, and contain, bombs. We get hit hard sometimes, but we still continue to sweep. We take it upon ourselves to look at every little thing.

“You get an attitude that comes from (terrorists) trying to blow you up. When (terrorists) put an IED out there, I’m gonna find it! That’s my contribution to this war.”

The whole crew echoed the sentiment and said they are all committed to finding IEDs before they can cause damage to their fellow Soldiers and Iraqi citizens.

“We help the Iraqis by making it safer for them to walk the streets,” said Sgt. Antwon Holmes, team leader, 2nd Plt., Co. B, who hails from Waco, Texas.

After the blast, another Soldier looked out the window at the school children held back by the cordon. “I think about my little boys, and I think about the children that are out here,” said Spc. Chris Kochenash, truck commander and Buffalo arm operator, 2nd Plt., Co. B, also from Yuma, Ariz. “I’m out here not only for the American Soldiers but for the Iraqi people as well.”

Their job helps save other people’s lives, added Sgt. Andrew Milczakowskyj, squad leader, 2nd Plt., Co. B. “The pressure of a blast could hurt a lot of people. Even something small could decimate five or six people.”

He said that responsibility keeps the team dedicated to the job and drives them on to work hard at hunting IEDs.

One reason the platoon has been so successful at finding IEDs comes from Army training, said Cerceau. On top of all the combat and survival training, he said the Soldiers have studied IEDs and the conditions typical of where and how IEDs are placed. The education is constantly updated to remain current.

Another reason they continue to find IEDs rests upon their extensive experience, said Kochenash. They have learned to be constantly vigilant for any signs of anything out of the ordinary or any suspicious behavior in potential bomb-triggermen and gunmen.

The crew members said they use their perception and experience, but instinct is also important.

“It’s like Spidey-sense,” Kochenash said. “Sometimes you just know that something is going to happen.” He added that they have learned to trust their instincts.

This leads to another reason for their success – the crew’s unwavering trust in one other.

“We don’t second-guess each other,” said Cerceau. “We trust each other.”

If one crewmember feels suspicious about something, even if another crewmember might not agree, they don’t argue about it, said Cerceau. Rather, they err on the side of caution and check it out.

“This group is so much tighter than any I’ve ever been with,” Cerceau added.

He said they have shared experiences being attacked with rocket-propelled grenades, small-arms fire, exploding IEDs and vehicle-borne IEDs. They have also shared the satisfaction of finding IEDs and thwarting terrorist plots.

“When we find an IED, it pisses (the terrorists) off,” concluded Kochenash. “We disrupt their attacks and save lives. That’s our job.”

And though these brothers-in-arms have dedicated close to a year to hunting IEDs, they are happy to be redeploying home in October and handing over the reigns to other Soldiers just as dedicated.



Explosion.

BAGHDAD – After Soldiers from 2nd Platoon, Company B, 5th Engineer Battalion, assigned to Multi-National Division – Baghdad's 16th Engineer Brigade, discovered an improvised-explosive device while hunting for IEDs during a route clearance mission, it harmlessly detonates behind a cordon after an Explosive Ordnance Disposal team arrived on site Wednesday in western Baghdad.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rodney Foliente, 4th Inf. Div. PAO)



Preparation.

BAGHDAD – Soldiers from 2nd Platoon, Company B, 5th Engineer Battalion, attached to Multi-National Division – Baghdad's 16th Engineer Brigade, prepare for a route clearance mission at Camp Liberty Wednesday.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rodney Foliente, 4th Inf. Div. PAO)



Preparation2.

BAGHDAD – Soldiers from 2nd Platoon, Company B, 5th Engineer Battalion, attached to Multi-National Division – Baghdad's 16th Engineer Brigade, prepare for a route clearance mission at Camp Liberty Wednesday.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rodney Foliente, 4th Inf. Div. PAO)



Milczakowskyj points.

BAGHDAD – Sgt. Andrew Milczakowskyj, a team leader from 2nd Platoon, Company B, 5th Engineer Battalion, attached to Multi-National Division – Baghdad's 16th Engineer Brigade, points at a suspicious pile of rubble as the platoon hunts for roadside bombs during a route clearance mission Wednesday in western Baghdad.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rodney Foliente, 4th Inf. Div. PAO)



Fixing the road.

BAGHDAD – Iraqi workers patch a hole in the road, preventing it from possible use as place for terrorists to plant improvised-explosive devices Wednesday in western Baghdad.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rodney Foliente, 4th Inf. Div. PAO)